

## Negotiating Polygamy: Women's Stories in Titis Basino's Works<sup>1</sup>

By Diah Ariani Arimbi, Ph.D.  
Airlangga University  
Surabaya, Indonesia



The various strands of contemporary feminism call for more nuanced readings of the political, ideological construction of women's roles within which feminist theory, practice and reading are situated. Muslim women are undeniably responsive to such calls and suggest various ways of engaging with their own social, cultural and political conditions. Through various discourses of their own they demonstrate their subject position and call for the "woman question" to be centred at the public level. In so doing they show that they are no longer "objects" in identity construction. One of the prominent women writers in Indonesian literary world who has been very productive in voicing woman question through her fictions is Titis Basino (later is simply called as Titis). Titis can be considered one of the very few women writers in Indonesia who has started her writing career since the 1960s and is still prolific up to now. Titis' strong narrative issue is the practice of polygamy; she approaches the issue from various stands. She looks at the influence of historical conditions, and her narratives show that the voices of women involved in the practice must certainly be heard, and understood in terms of complex cultural and social relations. The problematic perception of polygamy within the domain of female subjectivity and identity is also one of the unique characteristics of Titis' writings. Titis shows a consistency in depicting polygamy and women's reactions to it. In cultural politics of Indonesia's Islam, polygamy issues are perhaps the most difficult to deal with. This paper will then examine Titis works' that show how women deal with such problematic and complex issues and at the same time negotiate their subject positions in order to have self-empowerment or even disempowerment. In Titis' works too, whether through polygamy women are speaking up or even silenced will also be critically scrutinized.

### About the Author: Titis Basino P. I.

Titis Basino P. I. (P. I. stands for her husband's name Purnomo Ismadi) is the oldest of the four. This eighth of nine children of the Javanese Basino Atmodiwiryo family was born in Magelang, Central Java, January 7, 1939. She then spent her childhood in Madiun, and moved to Purwokerto with her family where she finished high school. Her writing career started during her secondary education as a writer of *majalah dinding* (high school magazine posted on the school wall). Her tertiary education was at the

<sup>1</sup> This paper is presented for Is Indonesian Islam different? Islam in Indonesia in an international comparative perspective. Novotel Hotel Bogor, 24 – 26 January 2011.

*Fakultas Sastra* (Faculty of Letters) *Universitas Indonesia*, Jakarta, where she graduated *Sarjana Muda* (equivalent to B.A) in Indonesian literature in 1962. She then had a short career (1962-1963) as a flight attendant with the national airline, *Garuda Indonesia*.<sup>2</sup> Titis spent her earliest childhood under Japanese rule and grew up in postcolonial Indonesia where she enjoyed the opportunity of having tertiary education. Experiencing the ways Indonesia shifted from a colonial to postcolonial society certainly enriches her knowledge of societal changes, and how a society perceives and deals with such changes. Her work as a flight attendant also provides her with opportunities to experience public life and make contact with people of different backgrounds. Although her later choice of housewife was a different route from her modern job as flight attendant, seemingly Titis has always positioned herself in the public sphere, exemplified by her career choices of flight attendant, writer, and as the Chair of a literary documentation organization.

She is currently living in Jakarta, her adopted city since 1958. Although she comes from a large family Titis only has four children. The Javanese saying "*banyak anak banyak rejeki*" (having more children means having more "windfalls" or "incomes"), does not seem to be largely followed in post 1960s Indonesia because Titis' generation was usually influenced by the government's comprehensive family planning program. To a certain degree, it can be said that through her writings Titis campaigns for the family planning program. In her works, family size usually consists of parents with two or three children: a nuclear family description. In identifying her fictionalised families as nuclear she takes a new direction; the "modern" family is nuclear, as opposed to the "traditional" extended family. In terms of family size the 1970s generation has even less children: from more than two children per family to just two children at the most per family. In Titis' case, having fewer children compared to her parents gives her more time to pursue her chosen career as she finds more time to write. Furthermore, because her children have their own families, she finds that her presence at home is no longer compulsory, thus she devotes most of her time to public roles.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> This career links her with another prominent author, NH. Dini, who also once worked as a flight attendant.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that imposed family planning might also jeopardise women's agency if they have no say about their reproduction rights.

In the 1960s Titis wrote short stories for the literary magazines *Horison* and *Sastra*, but her professional writing career began with her first novel publication, *Pelabuhan Hati* (Harbour of Heart, 1978). For the span of 10 years, from 1986 to 1996, due to personal reasons and family request, Titis devoted herself to her domestic role and produced very little work. She started writing again in 1997 following the death of her husband in 1996, and up to the present day she has produced at least 20 novels and numerous short stories. Among others are: *Di Bumi Aku Bersua Di Langit Aku Bertemu* (In Earth I Meet in the Sky I Encounter, 1983); *Bukan Rumahku* (Not My Home, 1986); *Welas Asih Merengkuh Tajali* (Compassion Embraces Love, 1997); *Mensucikan Perselingkuhan* (Purifying an Affair, 1998); *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardian* (I am Supiyah Hardian's Wife, 1998); *Tersenyumpun Tidak Untukku Lagi* (Your Smile is not for Me, 1998); *Tangan Tangan Kehidupan* (The Hands of Life, 1998); *Terjalnya Gunung Batu* (Steep Rocky Mountain, 1998); *Garis Lurus Garis Lengkung* (Straight Line Curved Line, 2000); *Aku Kendalikan Air, Api, Angin dan Tanah* (I Control Water, Fire, Wind and Earth, 1998); *Mawar Hitam Milik Laras* (Laras' Black Rose, 1999); *Sukma dan K. Wekas* (Sukma and K. Wekas, 2000); *Hari Yang Terbaik* (The Best Day, 2000); *Jala* (The Fishing Net, 2002); and *Tabu Pernikahan* (The Marriage Taboo, 2003). In 1998, her novel *Dari Lembah ke Coolibah* (From Valley to Coolibah, 1997) won a literary award from *Pusat Bahasa* (The National Language Centre), and it also won The South-East Asian Writers Award. In 1999, the Malaysian government awarded her the Mastra Prize, a competitive literary award.<sup>4</sup> Still pursuing her writing career, she is also the Chair of the Executive Board of *Pusat Dokumentasi Sastra H.B. Jassin* (H.B. Jassin Centre of Literary Documentation) in Jakarta.

Titis' narratives always depict women's world, women's problems and how they deal with them, creating exclusively a female gaze. Typical of her stories are the deceptive relationships in which women are victimised, yet from this victimisation they rise to self-empowerment. Titis believes that her portrayal of female characters is her way of

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Education about Asia', vol. 6, no. 1, Spring 2001, p. 1, <http://www.aasianst.org/EAA/her.htm>



In particular, she gives a voice to women who are deceived by their husbands' infidelity.

She says in one interview:

Since they cannot scream so I let those people know how women feel while being deceived through infidelity. There are many men having extra marital affairs but their wives just cannot get angry or cannot say no. I write so that those people can read.<sup>8</sup>

As Titis revealed further in the interview, her stories are not just pure imagination, many of them are real, based on real stories of real people. She tries to help these women by suggesting her way of reading their problems and bringing them to life in her literary production. Titis' method of putting real stories to fiction reflects and exemplifies representations of the real. Her power lies in the fact that she does not only represent women of a linear singularity, but different women following the historical changes that these women experience. Accordingly, Titis' protagonists move from the mature age widow in *Dari Lembah ke Coolibah*, to the young dutiful wife in *Jala*. Her flexibility in moving from one woman to the other structures an end to a fixation of identity meant to reflect all women all the time. Titis' characters are largely from a lower-social class who struggle to maintain equilibrium when their families undergo chaos caused by the husband's betrayal. Reading Titis' various women thus aims not merely to uncover her "truth", but also to investigate how such concepts of truth are formed, particularly in the ideological representation of the women characters: how they are manufactured and re-manufactured by the author using real stories of women she knows.

Although Titis celebrates the multiplicity of a woman's role in the society: "A woman must be able to be anything; a mother, a friend, a lover," she also states "a woman brings numerous images with her: her social, cultural and political status, which regrettably are often forsaken." Nevertheless, like most women of her generation, she believes women are not to escape from the conception of *kodrat*, thus the sexual division of labour. For her, woman's proper place is at home, and it is a woman's duty to take care of family matters because of her natural role of motherhood and domesticity. Although encouraging women to occupy public roles through education and labour, she insists that

---

<sup>8</sup> An interview with Titis Basino in the foyer of Pusat Dokumentasi Sastra H.B. Jassin, Jakarta, 1 June 2004.

women's primary roles are as wife, mother, homemaker, and as worker adding to the family income, but never as the family breadwinner, which should be primarily in the hand of the husband.<sup>9</sup> The most distinctive feature in her narratives is the issue of polygamy and betrayal through extramarital affairs. In coping with such catastrophe her female characters manage to stand upright and in the end it is the female figure who restores the disorder to order; her women are strong, independent and very self-empowered. Titis is a feminist in the sense that she is aware of constraints placed upon women due to their gender, how women sustain their existence in times of chaos, and how women yearn to remove these constraints and build a more equitable gender system. In this way, Titis indeed shows how women negotiate their subject positions in various social and cultural constraints. Women are victims but are not easily victimized without being aware of their victimization. Their negotiation attempts to end the silence that has been long imposed upon this gender.

### **Negotiating Polygamy**

The problematic perception of polygamy within the domain of female subjectivity and identity is one of the unique characteristics of Titis' writings. Titis shows a consistency in depicting polygamy and women's reactions to it. In Indonesia's Islam cultural politics, polygamy issues are perhaps the most difficult to deal with. The institutionalisation of polygamy within the *fiqh* is not strongly challenged, although this does not necessarily mean that women condone it. During the November 2004 *Muktamar* NU (NU Congress) in Boyolali, Central Java, women activists launched a strong protest to the organizing committee because the meals for the participants were supplied by the Wong Solo restaurant whose owner was an active propagandist of polygamy; he himself had four wives, the number sanctioned in Islamic jurisprudence. Sinta Nuriyah Abdurrahman Wahid argued that the aim of the protest was to defend the true Islamic *shari'a* and bring justice for all kinds, particularly those who were under oppression such as women,

---

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Titis Basino, 1 June 2004.

minority groups and the poor.<sup>10</sup> She stated that polygamy was violence against women's rights and as such was legally opposed by the United Nations. In reaction to the Polygamy Award<sup>11</sup> of July 2003, Muslim activists put anti-polygamy objections into their agendas; the activists strongly protested the ceremony, proclaiming that it was an attempt to undermine the women's movement and it is necessarily un-Islamic its nature said Maria Ulfah Anshor.<sup>12</sup>

The Department of Religious Affairs introduced a new marriage act, known as Counter Legal Draft Kompilasi Hukum Islam (KHI – Compilations of Islamic Law/Family Code), outlining a zero tolerance policy to any violence against women. The intention of the draft was to rectify the currently applied KHI—in particular it targeted polygamy and advocated women inheriting the same portion as men. Siti Musdah Mulia, the chairperson of the team set up by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to write the draft, stated that the KHI was not based on basic Islamic principles such as principles of equality (*al-musawah*), fraternity (*al-ikha*) and justice (*al-adl*).<sup>13</sup> The prohibition of polygamy, the permission for a woman above 21 years of age to conduct a marriage without the consent of a *wali* (the bride's father, brother or a male family member from the father's side), and permission for interfaith marriage were amongst the changes introduced in the draft. The reaction to the proposed changes was enormous as they were immediately taken as a breach of the interpretation of the existing *fiqh*; this was particularly so in the case of polygamy. Moderate and progressive Muslim scholars argued that the draft could be "part of a revolution in *shari'a*", whereas mainstream and right-wing scholars argued that the draft was heresy. In reaction to the controversy the Minister of Religious Affairs, on 14 February 2005, issued a ban on discussion of the draft revision of the Islamic Family

<sup>10</sup> Kompas Cyber Media, 29 November 2004, Internet, <http://www.kompas.com/gayahidup/news/0411/29/035011.htm>. (29 November 2004)

<sup>11</sup> Polygamy Award is an award given to the best practitioner of polygamy (to men only).

<sup>12</sup> The Wall Street Journal, 24 November 2003, Internet, <http://www.polygamyinfo.com/intnlmedia%20plyg%20216wallstreet.htm>. (25 February 2005)

<sup>13</sup> 'Siti Musdah Mulia: Poligami Haram karena Ekseksnya' *Tempo*, 11 – 17 Oktober 2004, p. 120.

Code. A coalition of twenty-seven women's NGOs protested, arguing that the ban was contradictory to Islamic principles, which tolerate differences in opinions.<sup>14</sup>

Even amongst activists of women's movements and feminists themselves there are varying views about the prohibition of polygamy. Siti Ruhayani Dzuhatin, the Chair of Women's Studies in the State Institute of Islamic Studies, argues against the prohibition because she believes polygamy should only be limited, not prohibited.<sup>15</sup> Julia Suryakusuma, a well-known feminist, proposed a resolution to the problem in her article, 'Poligami ala feminist.' She believes that being "a part time wife" will give her more freedom to exercise her own needs while sharing the household responsibilities with the other wife(s). Moreover, she advocates that new wives should be relatively older than the first wife because older women tend to be more self-wise and experienced in dealing with psychological problems such as jealousy and competition among wives, in this way, the tensions amongst wives can be reduced to a minimum.<sup>16</sup> Although it is presumed to be satirical, the article does offer a new way of looking at polygamy practices by creating new meanings out of such "dubious" practices.

It is not clear in Titis' narratives whether she agrees with or opposes polygamy. In her short story entitled *Dia* (Her), Titis depicts the emotional responses of a woman dealing with a polygamous marriage. The story reveals the psychological responses of the first wife whose husband takes a second wife; the suffering she has to endure:

Each time he left I felt a terrible loneliness. It was almost as though I had a wound that left no scar. I tried not to let my health deteriorate however. There was no question about what would become of the children. They would be taken to their father's other wife. It was for this reason that I was careful to disguise my emotions and maintain the harmony in our home—a home without a husband. Whether or not the children understood this sacrifice I'll never know; they were

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Jakarta Post online*, 28 October 2004, Internet, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/detailnational.asp?fileid=20041028.CO3&irec=2>, (28 October 2004)

<sup>15</sup> 'Dari Poligami sampai Kawin Beda Agama,' *Tempo*, 11 – 17 Oktober 2004, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> 'Poligami a la 'Feminis', Julia Suryakusuma, Internet, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/islamliberal/message/7753>, (2 March 2005)

too young to express such thoughts. I simply went about life swallowing my pride with rice.<sup>17</sup>

This voice probably represents the most natural response of a first wife, examining and essentialising the notion of sacrifice, which is not uncommon for Indonesian wives having no legal recourse against a husband's polygamy. On the one hand, her sacrifice can be read as woman's position under man's domination—*nasib*, which Titis frequently writes about in most of her works. On the other, if it is read against the grain, it indeed shows a woman's strength to endure pain and suffer. Nevertheless, as strong as she might be, her response to polygamy illustrates the positioning of a woman victimised by the practice of polygamy, particularly when religious determinism takes control:

A husband has the right to practice polygamy, and this was a test of my tolerance for it. I devoutly believed that as a woman I was destined to accept and protect. I had believed that, and also considered the fate of my children, I would merely have asked for a divorce and left him.<sup>18</sup>

In this narrative it seems that it becomes the woman's responsibility; that it is her natural *raison d'être* to sacrifice at all cost for her family and her children, but never for herself. This correlates to the conception of *kodrat*, which requires women, especially mothers, to be submissive and sacrifice for the good of all family members. In other words, "harga perempuan" (woman's value), is always measured from her familial identity.

The final resolution of Titis' *Dia* is quite challenging. The reconciliation established between the first and the second wife indeed illustrates an acclamation of the female ability to stage a dialogue between two women who desire to navigate their familial politics within the settings of polygamy. The two wives meet at a women's convention, and this meeting completely changes the first wife's repudiation of her competitor and she accepts her wholeheartedly. Rivalry has turned into sisterhood:

[N]ow I was being vindicated by the very one who had been the cause of my misery. I appreciated her where I have once feared her. . . . now I was impressed

---

<sup>17</sup> Titis Basino, 'Her', *In the Surau Seven Islamic Short Stories From Indonesia*, eds. Soejono Dardjowidjojo and Florence Lamoureux, Southeast Asia Paper No. 21, Southeast Asian Studies, Centre for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 1983, p.38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.



with the graceful manner in which she protected her rival's feelings. . . . She also had a right to a husband, even though fate decreed that he also be mine.<sup>19</sup>

Again, fate, or *nasib*, is the primary locus for women and they are expected to act within it, implying that religious submission and servanthood are the core modes of religious commitment. The heroine's final acceptance of polygamy may be seen as a backlash against feminism; however, the problematic issue of polygamy, exemplified through Titis' characters, deserves further examination. Titis' representation of the heroines who authenticate their female agencies through polygamy and sisterhood render these women subjects at the centre of speech, of female voice. Their negotiation with *nasib*, *kodrat*, domestication and polygamy enables them to secure a place in broader social activism as they leap from domestic life to a more public life. Both the first (older) and the second (younger) wife are activists of women's organizations, and having a co-wife means more time to work in their organisational activism: as the first wife says, "I felt like a new woman."<sup>20</sup> In this narrative, there seems to be a conception of hierarchy: the first wife receives more than the second. In reality, however, when polygamy is practiced without the consent of the first wife, commonly the second wife is more privileged. Whether the first, the second, the third or the fourth wife is more privileged, such a hierarchy certainly defies the concept of justice and equality, because polygamous marriage is supposedly to apply equality and justice to all wives and all children.

The achievement of Titis' heroines—self-empowerment through polygamy, should not be immediately perceived as what all women in polygamous marriages achieve. *Dia* reflects particularity of specific women under specific circumstances. That the practice of polygamy can lead to violence against women is supported by research. The *Jurnal Perempuan* (JP, Women's Journal) no 31 (2003) had a special edition on polygamy—*Menimbang Poligami* (Measuring Polygamy)—based on studies and researches conducted by women activists and women NGOs. In this special edition polygamy is criticised, confronted and also defended from a variety of female perspectives, including because of its historiography and roots in different religions such as Hinduism and

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Christianity. Nevertheless, the strongest emphasis was on polygamy as violence against women: be it as state policy in legitimising polygamy, as state violence against women, or polygamy as domestic violence. The studies also showed that women of all social and economic classes experience violence because of polygamy.

Titis' works, *Pelabuhan Hati* (Harbour of Heart, 1978), *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardian* (I am Supiyah, Hardian's Wife, 1998) and its sequel *Tersenyumpun Tidak Untukku Lagi* (Your Smile is not for Me, 1998), depict the victimisation of women because of polygamy. *Pelabuhan Hati*, which first appeared in short story form entitled *Meja Gambar*, is a classic narrative of a wife's fidelity against her husband's infidelity and polygamy. The early nuptial years of the characters Rani and Ramelan were without significant problems. However this changed when they achieved better economic and social attainments. Ramelan, an architect, promised Rani a new and better house and out of curiosity Rani, without Ramelan's permission, went to see the house for herself; she found Ramelan there with a young girl. Later Ramelan admitted to Rani that the girl was his younger wife. In other words, Ramelan had taken a second wife without Rani's consent. Rani asked Ramelan for a divorce and the story continues with Rani's struggle as a single mother with small children to survive and to cope with the pain and her denigrated status as a *janda muda* (young divorcee).

Similar to Rani, Supiyah in *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardian* and *Tersenyumpun Tidak Untukku Lagi* experiences the victimisation of polygamy. Behind Supiyah's back, Hardian, Supiyah's husband, takes two other wives: the twins Fitri and Fatma his former students. Supiyah, however, copes with Hardian's infidelity in a different way to Rani. If Rani is a representation of a housewife lacking economic resources, Supiyah has a stronger bargaining position. Like her husband, she is also a university lecturer and financially able to support herself and her family; the absence of Hardian's economic support did not significantly affect her financially but Supiyah feels humiliated and betrayed because she is a respected member of the intellectual community. Moreover, it was still Supiyah who needs to sacrifice for her children's sake and find ways to cope with her emotional turmoil stemming from such circumstances:

Yet, everyday I ignored Hardhi's behaviour, which neglected our household and me. The children did not feel that something was wrong as all of their needs were well fulfilled, so they kept continuing their schooling perfectly. With the courage of the waves of the Indian Ocean, I felt alive again. And from my prayers to the One, I forgot my sadness. Teaching at the faculty was my happiness and revived my pride; maybe my students too felt the changes in me.<sup>21</sup>

Supiyah's ability to survive after her husband's betrayal was not without difficulty. Hardhian's marries a second and third wife and Supiyah divorces him. However, her divorce leaves a psychological mark as she still loves Hardhian, even though she marries Sofyan, a wealthy widower. Her marriage to Sofyan is her way of revenging Hardhian's betrayal, proving that she too is a compatible opponent for Hardhian in the battle, but also that she is in need of a man to secure her position as a married woman, not a *janda*.<sup>22</sup> In her imagination, Supiyah dares to construct a world comparable to a man's where she can practice polyandry by marrying both Hardhian and Sofyan. Nevertheless, it is just an imaginary construction, the practice of polyandry in Islam, as in other religions, is completely prohibited and is condemned as immoral.

Rani in *Pelabuhan Hati* is another characterisation of a victimised woman because of infidelity and polygamy. In marrying his second wife, Laksmi, Ramelan completely ignores the emotional and economic needs of Rani and their children. Not only does Rani lament the favouritism shown by Ramelan to Laksmi, the younger and more attractive wife, the children too perceive the mistreatment suffered by their mother and are also despondent:

I sent my children to school by paddy cab. I no longer familiarised my children by using the car and so no longer reminded them of their father. Gradually I erased the memory of having a father from my children's minds. At first, the children still waited for their father's coming home from his office, but I told them that the one who was waited would never arrive again because he was busy with his project out of town. Milk and meat gradually disappeared from the dining table. Since I never spoiled my children, they did not really feel that they had lost nutritious food important for their growth.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Titis Basino P.I., *Aku Supiyah Istri Hardhian*, Grasindo, Jakarta, 1998, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Titis Basino P.I., *Tersenyum pun Tidak Untukku Lagi*, Jakarta, 1998, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Titis Basino P.I., *Pelabuhan Hati*, Pustaka Jaya, Jakarta, 1978, p. 18.

Economic change also becomes an expression of desertion. Ramelan's polygamy did not only cause his family financial and psychological problems, it also caused Rani to have the denigrated social status of *janda*. When Rani decides to turn her house into a boarding house for male students in order to have more income she is perceived as a wicked seducer who preys on young men. The accusation of her being *janda gatal* (seductive widow, literally meaning "itchy widow") also comes from Ramelan, who offers her money if she will end her boarding house. Ramelan says that Rani has become the talk of the town without realising that Rani is indeed the victim of his act. Rani refuses Ramelan's money thus claiming her independence: Rani's suffering has made her stronger and she is no longer afraid.<sup>24</sup> The rest of the story depicts Rani's empowerment and the ways she sustains herself and her family as a single woman. Sadly, her agency can only be achieved after she is psychologically and financially abused through her husband's abandonment.

The stories of Supiyah and Rani show that polygamous marriages are open to abuse. They also clearly picture the inability of husbands to disseminate justice, the very condition of polygamy: "If you fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one."<sup>25</sup> A literal reading of the verse provides that justice must characterise the practices of polygamy, yet in reality these two conditions are hardly achievable. Indeed, the two stories leave the clear impression of injustice and inequality. Also, polygamy, as the verse suggests, can only be justified under particular circumstances, particularly in relation to a man's inability to deal justly with the orphans. Being an orphan in seventh century patriarchal Arabia was parallel to being left without protection and at risk of abuse. Polygamy is permitted only when a man fears he cannot justly treat the orphans, then as he fears of his inability to treat his wives justly, monogamy is obligatory. It can be argued that if the condition foregrounding polygamy fails to exist, monogamy is superior. Furthermore, Calislar, quoted by Benard, asserts that the role of polygamy in early Islam was designed as a

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Sura An-Nisaa verse 3, The Holy Qur'an English translation of the meaning and Commentaries*, King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, Al-Madinah A- Munawarah, Saudi Arabia, 1410H, p. 206.



“welfare project”, protecting widows whose husbands were killed at wars and to be their breadwinners as well.<sup>26</sup> Taken into a broader framework, those early polygamy practices, Calislar adds, aimed to create alliances for political or charitable causes, rather than simply personal ones.

In scrutinising polygamy today many Muslim feminists, including activists of women NGOs in Indonesia, propose that it should be restricted because it contributes to injustice and domestic violence against women. In the special edition of *Jurnal Perempuan* (see above) LBH Apik, an NGO for legal advocacy and justice for women, which dealt with women victims of polygamy: physical, sexual and economic abuse, and abandonment of themselves and their children called for the practice to be banned completely.<sup>27</sup> Although the KHI emphasises the concept of justice in legitimising polygamous marriage; a husband must treat all wives and children equally and the first wife’s consent must be obtained before any subsequent marriages, the same codes still secure the possibility for a husband to practice polygamy without the consent.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the religious court can issue the consent if the first wife refuses to do so. Here, the state clearly supports polygamy even though the state says it promotes monogamy.

In Indonesia, culture, religion and state interference have deeply institutionalised polygamy; simply banning it is thus both paradoxical and complicated. Women’s responses to polygamy are also far from a consensus. Some argue that, because polygamy results more in *madharat* (vices) than *maslahat* (virtues), it should, therefore, be entirely prohibited. Others reason that it should be limited, and yet others argue for a compromise: applying an idealised condition that it must provide justice amongst the wives. The latter also argue that polygamy fosters a domestic environment of shared responsibilities, thus easing the household and economic workload for women. Yet

---

<sup>26</sup> Cüneyt Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam Partners, Resources, and Strategies*, RAND, National Security Research Division, Santa Monica, CA, 2003, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Poligami sebagai Bentuk Kekerasan yang Paling Nyata atas Harkat dan Martabat Perempuan sebagai Manusia di dalam Hukum, Sosial Budaya dan Agama’, Cuplikan Siaran Pers LBH-APIK tanggal 24 Juli 2003, *Jurnal Perempuan*, No. 31, 2003, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> Vony Reyneta, ‘Kebijakan Poligami: Kekerasan Negara Terhadap Perempuan’, *Jurnal Perempuan*, No 31, 2003, p. 12.

another concern about the practice concerns the status of children. Most of Titis' narratives concerning polygamy considerably neglect the presence of children, and the impact that the absence of a father has on them. The absence of in-depth portrayals of children in most of Titis' stories can be reasoned as the author privileging women's responses to polygamy. Perhaps the absence of children in Titis' narratives shows that when polygamy is practiced, children are never taken into account. Polygamy is a "grownup thing" and children are considered to have no part in it. Indeed, such an attitude ignores the way the practice affects all family members, including children. The neglect of the fate of the abandoned children seems at odds with the importance of woman as mother in both the New Order era, and in Islamic values.

Titis never blatantly criticises polygamy but she does present multi-pictures of polygamous practices, the affect upon women's lives and the ever-present despair that pervades households. This is what probably might be termed as negotiating polygamy. Titis reveals her multi-allegiances—for and against polygamy—through narratives where her characters have room for self-disclosure. Covering information on various female responses of polygamy Titis paints women's voices of objection, anger or compromise as they deal with Islamic tenets of spousal responsibilities. In capturing women's responses to polygamy Titis never develops extreme one-dimensional characters of good and evil, instead she works on multifaceted representations of these women. In her narratives Titis reveals polygamy as dynamic and therefore in need of careful scrutiny and contextualisation. It seems that in her narratives Titis implicitly impresses the notion of female subjugation, yet her narratives commonly end with female self-fulfilment and satisfaction at their ability to make choices for themselves. She creates heroines who take action to obstruct gender bias, declining to play forever the role of victim, even in matters where room for choice is limited; Titis' characters show the ways women exercise their agency. Women, in Titis' works, have shown their ways of negotiating polygamy in order to create rooms for them to make manoeuvres when necessary.



**Universiteit Leiden**

**Training Indonesia's Young Leaders  
Muslim Intellectuals as Agents of Change**

[www.indonesiayoungleaders.org](http://www.indonesiayoungleaders.org)  
[indonesiayoungleaders@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:indonesiayoungleaders@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

<b>To</b>	Diah Ariani Arimbi	<b>Date</b>	14 December 2010
		<b>Telephone</b>	+31 71 527 4139
<b>Subject</b>	Official invitation "Is Indonesian Islam Different? Islam in Indonesia in a comparative international perspective"	<b>Contact</b>	Mrs. Marise van Amersfoort

**To Whom It May Concern:**

Herewith I state officially that Diah Ariani Arimbi has been invited to participate in the conference "Is Indonesian Islam different? Islam in Indonesia in a comparative international perspective", which will be held in Bogor, Indonesia from 24-26 January 2011. Diah Ariani Arimbi will give a presentation, titled "Negotiating Polygamy: Women's Stories in Titis Basino's Works".

The "Is Indonesian Islam different?" conference is organized by the Training Indonesia's Young Leaders Programme (Leiden University) in cooperation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Jakarta) and Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta (PPIM).

The organization of the conference shall pay for Diah Ariani Arimbi's accommodation (including breakfast, lunch and dinner) in Novotel Bogor. We have booked a hotel room for Diah Ariani Arimbi from 23 January – 26 January 2011.

If you have any questions about the conference, the Training Indonesia Young Leaders Programme and our co-organizers, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours Sincerely,

Mrs. Marise van Amersfoort, M.Sc.

*On behalf of the Training Indonesia's Young Leaders Programme, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta*